

editorial

Compromise needed on laguna policy

by John B. Burns

MARCH 1988

This week's planning commission hearing on the future of the Laguna de Santa Rosa, the freshwater marsh that borders Sebastopol on its eastern edge, clearly demonstrated the community's high degree of concern for a very unique environmental treasure. But before the City of Sebastopol adopts the controversial Laguna Committee Report in its entirety, it would be wise to consider balancing laguna preservation concerns with those of affected property owners.

The need to adopt a laguna preservation policy has become increasingly apparent in recent years. Numerous land use conflicts regarding properties nearby or adjacent to the laguna, coupled with recent publicity focusing on the laguna's use as a sewage disposal "pipeline" to the Russian River have contributed to the city's decision to commission a study on the laguna's future. From that study, city leaders hope to formulate a fair and workable policy that balances property owners' concerns with the need to protect and preserve what is at once a valuable wildlife habitat and natural buffer separating Sebastopol from its rapidly expanding urban neighbor to the east.

Historically, the laguna has taken more than its share of abuse. The leisurely boat rides taken by residents and visitors across the pristine waters of the laguna at the turn of the century gave way to increasing development in Sebastopol which used the waterway as its sewage disposal system during the 30s, 40s and 50s. Infill from both sides during that same period and beyond have shrunk the original laguna to less than half its original size.

Still, it's a preservable entity and one which can benefit Sebastopol residents in numerous ways. The Laguna Advisory Report is the first tangible evidence of Sebastopol's commitment to laguna preservation and, not surprisingly, outlines the optimal course for protecting the laguna from any further encroachment. Ironically, Laguna Committee members determined that continued dumping of sewage effluent into the laguna was one of the more effective means for preserving the beleaguered waterway. Their recommendation for continued effluent discharge has split the West County environmental community since Russian River activists are opposed to any kind of sewage disposal into the river.

The sewage disposal question aside, the issue facing Sebastopol planning commissioners and city council members is how to translate the committee's recommendations into a fair, balanced and feasible public policy. Several property owners, including the city itself which has established a light industrial zone along Morris Street, would be seriously impacted were the committee's recommendations adopted without revision. Those same property owners could face a considerable reduction in the value of their lands since the development potential would be eliminated or reduced by the "no-fill" stipulation contained in the Laguna Report. Aside from the ethical question this raises, last year's Supreme Court decision forcing public entities to compensate property owners for policy decisions that result in reduced property values creates a very real financial concern for the city. Add to that the potential loss of proposed developments that could provide Sebastopol residents with increased goods, services, or job opportunities, and those costs increase even further.

Balancing the economic and financial concerns of the city and property owners with the very real need to adopt a strong public policy protecting the laguna is now the responsibility of the Sebastopol Planning Commission. Their final decision on laguna policy will not be an easy one to make, but is badly needed in order to clarify the city's commitment on how best to protect its most unique environmental element.

were once auctioned off at \$40 an hour."

A few of the citizens questioned the 76-foot "no net land fill requirement." One person said his property at 73.5-foot elevation had been given a cachet by the Army Corps of Engineers, and called the 1986 flood a fluke.

"The dams were too full," he said.

Karen Eberhardt disagreed. Delivering a speech that got the strongest applause that night, she said developers were taking a myopic view and should think about the big picture.

"For a few lousy, cheap houses, you compromise our waterways," she said.

Some, such as Sierra Club representative Carol Vellatini, spoke out against more than a one percent wastewater discharge into the laguna, which is being considered for a wastewater marsh plan.

The commission ended the public hearing and continued the laguna study to its March 30 meeting.